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A Forester in Nicaragua

Leo B. Allen

Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, is no more a logging town than Ames, Iowa. It is a sanctuary for bootleggers, but at the same time, if it were not for the Bragmans Bluff Lumber Co. it wouldn't be on the map. (If it's there now it's news to me.) It was here that I arrived on Aug. 22, 1927, after being delayed several months because of the various Nicaraguan insurrections, to assume the many and varied duties of a forester out for "practical experience."

As a seaport Puerto Cabezas is ideal. It is built upon a section of Tuapi Bay which tapers from a wide sandy beach to a sixty-foot bluff. The residential section of the town is on this bluff while the wharf and shacks of the wharf-rats (pickle toters, we call them) are located at the point where bluff and beach meet. The sawmill, which averages about one hundred M feet of "Nicaraguan Yellow Pine" per day, is the only commercial plant in port and, besides bananas, yellow pine is the only export.

The port is divided into three sections.

The first is the zone where all the white people live in houses built upon 8"x8" stilts six feet high. These houses have from four to seven rooms and are completely modern except for gas. Over three hundred American, English and German employees with their families live here.

The second is the "Baracones", the tenement section, where the Indian and Spanish laborers reside along with their families. One baracone has from eight to a dozen rooms in it. Each room is about 10 x 10 ft. and there is one room to a family. And when I say family I mean it to the nth degree for they sure don't Hooverize on the crop of picaninnies here. The company provides these baracones free of rent to all employees and when they cease to work they move out or get moved.

The third is the Bilwi (pronounced "Bill-way") and is the cantina district. If you've ever been in a "cantina district" south of the Rio Grande you know what this one is like. For those who never have, and who may read this, let me say that it is one long winding street with shacks on both sides of it, and in these shacks is anything you want and probably a lot that you don't want.

The natives here are of three classes—Indians, Spanish, and mixed bloods. Their natures differ to the extreme. The

Indians are quiet, law abiding and honest. (The only law I've seen here is what a company of U. S. Marines enforced at the points of bayonets.) The Spaniards are just the opposite and the mixed bloods are holy terrors—especially when they get lit on "Kasoasa" (native white mule).

For instance, the night I arrived here the mixed bloods threw a wing-ding and invited their "Spick" friends to bring



The Bilwi section.

their own Kasoasa (which they did). They ended the party in true collegiate style with a big bon-fire which happened to be the dry shed adjacent to the planing mill. One week later they repeated the performance, choosing for their bon-fire a hay and grain store house. Two weeks after that they burned up our Club house. As this club house was the home of some twenty white men and contained the only phonograph, barber chair, piano and library in Port its loss was keenly felt by us.

The country here would be a seventh heaven to a botanist, as Dr. Pammel, but to a cruiser it is h--l. It may be classified into three types according to the vegetation; Savannah, pine land and brush land.

The Savannah type occurs in a strip along the coast, with an average width of about ten miles. From a distance this type resembles good grazing land but upon closer inspection it shows to be nothing but bunch grass and bog, watersoaked for nine months of the year and a sunburned expanse of

waste land during the dry season. This area is barren of trees with the exception of thick clumps of palmetto which grow along the heads of the creeks. The soil in the type is a sour silt loam.

The pine land forms a border between the Savannah and the brush types, varying in width but never more than three kilometers or two miles. Here the land is quite open except for the water ways, which, due to the excessively heavy rains, often carry enormous quantities of water and must all be bridged. The soil is a coarse sand.

The brush type is found along the banks of every stream, large and small, and widens out the farther inland it goes until the different stands meet and it becomes solid brush. That point in this vicinity is about twenty-two kilometers from the coast. I won't try to describe this type except to say that there is every species of tropical brush, shrub, vine, and tree ever named and the whole mass is interlaced and so matted together that an ordinary dog would find difficulty in getting thru it. The only means of travel here is by game trail or on the streams in small mahogany pitpans. The soil in this type is a rich loam with occasional acid spots.

The game is plentiful—deer, wild pig, wild turkeys, mountain hens, mountain cows, red spotted jaguars, and quail. Monkeys, alligators, baboons, armadillos, and parrots are plentiful. All the streams are alive with fish—rock bass, (called June fish here) trout, croakers, and a lot I don't know the names of.

The company owns eighty-eight kilometers of main line railroad throughout their logging and banana-raising areas. In addition to this they have a considerable amount of narrow gauge spur line upon which gasoline locomotives operate bringing the fruit from the plantations to the mainline. Three rod engines are used on the main track at present.

The logging camp is very similar to any southern logging camp. All the white employees live in camp cars housing two or three men each. The natives and their families live in camp cars—baracone style. Each of these cars have four rooms, thereby housing four families. About one hundred twenty natives (80 percent Indians) work here. There are nineteen white men here.

Most of the operations here are on a ten hour basis altho the time put in may be more or less. The natives are given what they call a "task" to do when they leave camp and they come in when ever their task is finished and receive ten hours for it. For example, the skidder's crew has a

daily task of three hundred logs. For the sawyers a task of five logs equals one hour.

The wage scale just naturally "isn't." The natives work at from sixteen to thirty cents an hour depending upon the job they are assigned to. White men draw from thirty five cents an hour to two hundred pesos per month (Money has the same value here as in the U. S. In fact about 70 percent of it here is U. S.)

Two McGifford loaders and a Lidgerwood "double barrelled" skidder are used for taking out the logs. A large number of teams are also used for hauling logs to the main line. The mill, which turns out an average of three hundred 6"x8"x8' ties, is supplied entirely with logs hauled by team. The saw-mill turns out on an average of one hundred thousand board feet per day and every grade and dimension of yellow pine is milled at the planing mill according to the rules of the S. P. A.

Altho bananas are out of my line, I believe I should say something about them for they are the chief issue with this company—lumber is simply a side line. The brush soil is the only soil that grows bananas and there is where the work begins, for all the brush must be cleared off. It is simply felled and left to rot, which doesn't take long in this country. Then there is a race between the new growth of brush and the banana plants for supremacy. When the banana plants are about half grown, about four months after planting, the native workmen are sent in with machetes (knives about 3 feet long) to cut down the young brush. Bananas are started like potatoes, from the eyes of tubers which grow on the roots of the plant. They are spaced approximately 12 ft. x 12 ft. The next time the plantation is swamped out is just before the fruit is cut. The bananas are shipped to the wharf in cars similar to stock cars not more than twelve hours before the boat is to be loaded. This is because bananas, if left in the sun after picking, will rot before ripening. An interesting fact about bananas is that if left to ripen on the stalk, they have an entirely different taste and become pithy.

Altho the U. S. papers carry long epistles concerning the revolts and insurrection here in Nicaragua, we, on the Atlantic side, never hear anything of it. But a year and a half ago all the fighting was done in this vicinity. On August 24 and 25, 1926, General Sandino and his lieutenants came thru here and drafted every sunburned native, at the points of machetes, into his army. On August 26, 1926 they attacked Puerto Cabezas and took it. It was estimated after the

battle that forty-three thousand rounds of rifle and machine gun ammunition was used in the battle. The casualties numbered nineteen and about fifty were wounded. Good marksmanship you'll have to admit.

A number of humorous incidents went along with the revolution. The most humorous was to see the "Red" army drilling—they didn't. Armed with anything from machetes



Revolutionists landing at Puerto Cabezas, December 12, 1926.

to machine guns, dressed in anything they could pick up they were a motley crew, drunk half the time and asleep the other half. After the air had cleared and the "Red" army gave way to the Regulars, the latter sent a delegation by way of aeroplanes to look the situation over. While they were within the city of Bluefields some "Blue" enthusiasts took the idea into their heads that it was a "Red" plane, and burned it. I hope to learn more about the trouble down here when I return to the United States. It should prove interesting.

So far my work and experiences here have been darned interesting and of considerable value to me. I am sure that getting such a job will help any fellow studying forestry, even if he doesn't intend to get into this particular brand of it. It can't help but give him a new slant and some new ideas. For something different in the way of country and conditions—"Come South, young man, come South."